

No Glamor in Soldier Shows

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Ada Leonard

GLAMOR? Say, don't make me laugh," said Ada Leonard, crossing her legs and making a funny face. "There's as much glamor in trouping Army camps as there is in digging slit trenches."

"Ada," rebuked her press agent, "this is for an Army magazine."

"So what?" asked Ada scornfully. "So who are we kidding? This glamor business—it's getting on my nerves. Anyway, no outfit ever picked me to be the girl they'd like most to have pneumonia with or guard on a lonely South Sea Isle. And I've been to an awful lot of camps."

She has, too. Ada Leonard and the 16 dolls in her All-American Girl Orchestra have been hitting Army and Navy posts on the USO coast-to-coast circuit for the past two years in straight six-month stretches. They have played practically every post in the country that has stage facilities, and a few that don't.

Did Ada like playing for servicemen? Not especially. Then maybe she did it for the money? No, she was lucky to come out with expenses paid. For the glory? You can't buy cigarettes and nylon stockings with glory. Possibly she was carrying a torch for a soldier boy friend?

"Listen, Dr. IQ," flared Miss Leonard, "I'm not carrying a torch for anybody. I haven't any boy friend in the service. Must I have a reason for playing soldier camps? I haven't any reason. I just do it, that's all."

Ada Leonard was born in Lawton, Okla., 25 years ago. Her mother is Irish, her father English and they were old-time vaudeville troupers. Lawton is located a stone's throw from Fort Sill, and Momma and Poppa Leonard used to carry Ada to camp when they entertained GIs there during the first World War. And she's been in the show business ever since.

Playing the USO circuit, Ada explained, was mostly routine stuff plus a lot of hard work. Her nearest approach to romance was when a dog-face at Chanute Field, Ill., tried to make a pass at her in the back of a bus. "He was a little high," she said. "I talked to him like a big sister, and he calmed down."

The loudest applause she got was when she was playing at Camp Cooke, Calif., in January 1942. Her skirt fell down in the middle of a dance number and the fellows thought she was going to do a strip tease. But she snapped the skirt back into place and finished the dance, while gloom descended on the house.

When she played at Camp Edwards, Mass., in September 1942, her trumpet player took sick, so they picked up a soldier from the camp to fill in. They put a dress and a wig on the guy, and no one in the audience knew the difference. "He was the best trumpeter that ever played for me," she added.

All in all her audiences have been pretty swell, except for the time she played at a certain Naval station in New England last February. The first three rows of the theater were filled with gold braid and their wives. The next five rows were empty because they had been reserved for some more gold braid that didn't show up. The rest of the house was loaded with sailors, and some were standing in the back. Every time the sailors would holler and whistle, the officers' wives would turn around and stare at them coldly. Then they'd turn back and stare coldly at Ada and her girls.

"They made me feel like I was standing in front of a firing squad," Ada said.